

FINDING
PROPOSED OLD HIGHWAY
TIMBER SALE PROJECT
STILLWATER STATE FOREST

An Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) has completed the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed Old Highway Timber Sale Project.

The proposed timber sale project area is located in 4 scattered sections of common school trust lands near the towns of Trego, Fortine, and Eureka in Lincoln County. The specific, legal descriptions are:

- Edna Mountain Section - Approximately 640 acres in Section 16, Township 34 north, Range 26 west.
- Fortine Creek Section - Approximately 183 acres in Section 36, Township 35 north, Range 26 west.
- Alkali Lake Section - Approximately 618 acres in Section 36, Township 36 north, Range 27 west.
- Pinkham Creek Section - Approximately 640 acres in Section 36, Township 36 north, Range 28 west.

After a thorough review of the EA, project file, public correspondence, Montana statutes, and *State Forest Land Management Plan (SFLMP)* and adopted rules, I have made the following 3 decisions:

1. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Two alternatives are presented and were fully analyzed in the EA:

- The No-Action Alternative includes existing activities, but does not include a timber harvest or acquisition of easements to the lands described above.

- The Action Alternative proposes to:

- harvest approximately 4.9 million board feet (mmbf) of sawlogs and nonsawlog material from 974 acres;
- remove trees susceptible to root rot diseases and insect infestations; and
- promote the regeneration of tree species less susceptible to diseases and insects;
- utilize several types of road-access agreements and easements to provide access to and within State-owned sections for the long term;
- upgrade the surface drainage on portions of roads to meet Best Management Practices (BMPs); and
- apply forest fuel-reduction treatments to State land to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland fires, in particular, on State lands adjacent to urban development.

I have selected the Action Alternative.

RATIONALE FOR DECISION

I have selected the Action Alternative with considerations to the following rationale:

- The Action Alternative meets the *PURPOSE OF PROPOSED ACTION* (page I-1) and *OBJECTIVES OF PROPOSAL* (page I-2) list the specific project objectives.
- The lands involved in this project are held by the State of

Montana in trust for the support of specific beneficiary institutions. DNRC is required by law to administer these trust lands to produce the largest measure of reasonable and legitimate return over the long run (*Enabling Act of February 22, 1889; 1972 Montana Constitution, Article X, Section 11; and, 77-1-202, Montana Codes Annotated [MCA]*). The SFLMP and associated rules provide the management philosophy and framework to evaluate which alternative would maximize real income while sustaining the production of long-term income.

- On March 13, 2003, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) adopted Administrative Rules for the Forest Management (*Administrative Rules of Montana [ARM] 36.11.401 through 450*). This project is designed in accordance with the Rules.
- The proposed timber sale project contributes to harvest levels mandated by State statute (*MCA 77-5-222*).
- DNRC is required to salvage timber damaged by insects, diseases, fires, or wind before value is lost to decay, provided such harvesting is economically warranted (*MCA 77-5-207*).
- The analyses of identified issues did not reveal information to persuade the DNRC to choose the No-Action Alternative.

HOW THE CHOSEN ALTERNATIVE ADDRESSES CONCERNS AND ISSUES:

The Action Alternative was designed to address concerns expressed by the public and DNRC specialists, which include, but are not limited to, the following:

Vegetation:

- The project does harvest in approximately 14 acres of timber that currently meets DNRC's old-growth definition. This stand is at high risk for Douglas-fir beetle attacks due to characteristics that include the proportion of Douglas-fir, the stocking density, age, and diameter (*page III-2*). Timber stands adjacent and in near proximity to the old-growth stand proposed for harvesting have experienced substantial tree mortality due to Douglas-fir bark beetle infestations. Following this harvest, 8.8 percent of the classified forest acres on Stillwater State Forest and scattered sections in northern Lincoln County will be expected to remain as old growth (*page III-4*). The project complies with DNRC's Forest Management Rules (*ARM 36.11.401 to 450*) by considering a variety of factors at the project level, including timber stand age-class amounts, distribution, stand characteristics, and others. Based on these considerations, DNRC chose to include the 14-acre old-growth stand for harvesting under the Action Alternative. Considering the other programmatic criteria, harvesting in this stand now with this project, rather than at a later date, would best meet DNRC's fiduciary objectives by selling the higher valued live timber rather than lower valued dead timber. This would also better meet the desired future forest condition.

- The project is designed to not harvest where sensitive plants exist within wetland complexes. Additional monitoring and herbicide treatment of noxious weeds is proposed (*page III-6 through III-8*).
- The risk of wildfire will be reduced on State lands by (*pages III-4 through III-6*):
 - treating logging slash to limit slash retention to approximately 10 tons of large woody debris per acre, with fine fuels being largely removed from the site following site preparation, piling, and burning;
 - by thinning the existing overstory and understory to remove ladder fuels;
 - creating openings that would help wildfire-suppression efforts by reducing fire intensity and increasing areas where fireline could successfully be constructed; and
 - improving access to State land for fire suppression efforts.

Soils:

The project is designed to protect soil productivity and reduce compaction to existing skid trails when appropriate. The operation of heavy equipment will be limited to when conditions are relatively dry, frozen, or snow covered. The amount of skid trails will be limited to restrict total density (*pages III-22 through III-28*).

Economics:

The estimated total timber-dollar revenue from this sale is expected to generate \$1,215,690 for the Common School Trust and Forest Improvement Fund (*page III-37*).

Water Quality and Fisheries:

The effects to water quality and fisheries would be reduced by:

- meeting all applicable Streamside Management Zone (SMZ) rules and following the Montana Administrative Rules for Forest Management;
- adding erosion-control measures that, over the long term, will reduce sediment delivery to streams;
- using haul routes that meet BMPs, which would reduce sediment to streams and other bodies of water (*pages III-11 through III-21*).
- utilizing a prescription that would include a 100-foot Riparian Management Zone (RMZ) along Fortine Creek, which would allow no harvesting for the first 25 feet immediately adjacent to the stream channel and harvesting up to 50 percent of the trees 8 inches dbh or larger for the next 75 feet; this would allow future recruitment of down woody debris and retain shading to maintain cool temperatures. No timber harvesting is proposed within 100 feet of Pinkham Creek (*pages III-11 through III-21; pages III-29 through III-35*).

Wildlife:

This alternative was designed to retain important wildlife habitat components such as snags, coarse woody debris, hiding cover, and seasonal security (*pages III-38 through III-57*).

Road Rights-of-way, Acquisitions, and Construction:

Concern was expressed that purchasing rights-of-way may lead to future development of State or adjacent lands. Concern was also expressed that newly constructed roads would be built to a higher standard than necessary for forest management purposes. Road reconstruction and new construction for this project was designed to

meet BMPs and facilitate forest-management activities now and into the future. New road construction will be built with a minimum-width driving surface and to applicable standards to facilitate forest management activities.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF IMPACTS

For the following reasons, I find the Action Alternative will not have significant impacts on the human environment:

- I find that no impacts are regarded as severe, enduring, geographically widespread, or frequent. Further, I find that the quantity and quality of various resources, including any that may be considered unique or fragile, will not be adversely affected to a significant degree. I find no precedent for future actions that would cause significant impacts, and no conflict with local, State, or Federal laws, requirements, or formal plans. In summary, I find that the identified adverse impacts will be avoided, controlled, or mitigated by the design of the project to the extent that the impacts are not significant.
- Locally Adopted Environmental Plans and Goals - In June 1996, DNRC began a phased-in implementation of the SFLMP. The SFLMP establishes the Agency's philosophy for the management of forested trust land. In March 2003, DNRC adopted the Forest Management Rules concerning the SFLMP. The SFLMP philosophy and associated rules are incorporated in the design of the proposed project.
- Recreational Activities - Recreational opportunities will continue and will not be negatively affected by the proposed project.
- Precedent Setting and Cumulative

Impacts - The project area is located on State-owned lands that are "principally valuable for the timber that is on them or for growing timber or for watershed protection" (MCA 77-1-402).

- Taken individually and cumulatively, the proposed activities are common practices and no project activities are being conducted on fragile or unique sites.
- The proposed project conforms to the management philosophies of DNRC and is in compliance with existing laws, rules, policies, and standards applicable to this type of proposed action.

3. SHOULD DNRC PREPARE AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (EIS)?

Based on the following considerations, I find that an EIS does not need to be prepared:

- The EA adequately addresses the issues identified during project development and displays the information needed to make the decisions.
- Evaluation of the potential impacts of the proposed Old Highway Timber Sale Project indicates that no significant impacts would occur.
- The ID Team provided adequate opportunities for public review and comment. Public concerns were incorporated into the project design and analysis of impacts.

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